

Chad: Democratisation Challenges and Limits of International Intervention

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Theme: International interventions in Chad, such as the European Eufor Chad, must address structural problems linked to governance and democracy by helping Chadian political actors to reform the country's social contract instead of focusing on preserving stability and, thus, becoming part of the problem and not of the solution.

Summary: At the beginning of February 2008 a coalition of armed movements launched an attack on the Chadian capital N'Djamena from their Sudanese base and almost toppled the government of President Deby. The spectacular rebel offensive did not only take the Chadian government by surprise but also put the French military under enormous pressure. Their initial hesitation to support the Chadian army according to bilateral military agreements between the two countries was due to their concern not to jeopardise the neutrality of the Eufor, the European Force that, by that time, was supposed to be deployed in eastern Chad and the Central African Republic. Finally, backed by strong international support, the French military provided the Chadian army with the necessary intelligence and logistic tools to repulse the rebel assault. With these new developments, Deby's grip on power seems consolidated for the next few years. But are the prospects for peace also consolidated in Chad?; will President Deby transform his military victory into a more participative and inclusive ruling style?; and are international interventions contributing to structural stability in a particularly turbulent region? These are some of the questions this ARI attempts to address with the aim of shedding some light on the complexities of Chad's political crisis. It argues that in order to avoid being part of the problem, international interventions should aim to address the challenges linked to a failed democratisation by helping Chadian political actors to reform the country's social contract. Otherwise, well-intentioned and expensive peacekeeping operations will not achieve more than symbolic goals.

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Analysis: Chad is one of the few African countries where the political reform process of the 90s did not even lead to the emergence of a façade democracy. What is generally labelled elsewhere in the continent as a democratisation process actually produced an authoritarian restoration that exacerbated already existing local and national conflicts. Political instability in the Central African country has deep roots that can be traced back as far as pre-colonial and colonial times. French colonisation fundamentally transformed the already existing socio-political power constellations. Wealthy and belligerent Northern Sultanates used to capture slaves in the South and sell them to Arab traders. The links between the two parts of the territory were generally characterised by a dominating and mostly Islamised North against a less centrally-organised and animist South that was essentially agricultural. Because of the strong resistance of Northerners to colonial penetration, the French favoured the Southerners who were much easier to control and proved to be more open to the colonial redistribution of power. In doing so, the French introduced a new socio-political cartography of the country by which the South acquired a new status. Geographical stereotypes were created that implied new economic, cultural, political and social categories that ended in the characterisation of the South as *Tchad utile* (useful Chad) and the North implicitly as *Tchad inutile* (useless Chad). The reconstruction of the North-South dichotomy by the French was in line with the colonial needs of geo-strategic implantation and economic exploitation. This had a tremendous impact on the development patterns of both parts of the country, to the North's disadvantage. The concentration of colonial investments in the South (introduction of the cotton culture, creation of a rudimentary education system aimed at building a local elite and construction of a rudimentary public infrastructure) went along with a neglect of the North and contributed to exacerbate the tensions between two parts of the same country, that are generally perceived as antagonistic.

In fact, many analysts consider North and South Chad as two environmentally and ethnically distinct entities. The difference is sometimes mentioned to underline the alleged incompatibility of population groups in African countries. If the environmental divide between North and South might bear some credence, the dichotomy between a presumably Arabised North and a non-Arab South is more of an over-simplification that fails to reflect the complex fragmentation of Chad's various groups of population. Moreover, the dichotomy does not make sense of the geographical distribution of ethnic communities in Chad, where a large population group (around 33% of the total) lives in the centre of the country and does not fit into the usual categorisations (Arab/Black African, Moslem/animist).

By the time the country gained independence in August 1960, the only available generation of politicians was mostly from the South. Their main challenge was the peaceful governance of a huge territory (three times bigger than France) with a long tradition of violence between different ethnic groups,¹ few natural resources and, most worryingly, extremely weak institutions. To consolidate his power, the country's first President, François Tombalbaye, resorted to repression and authoritarian rule, which alienated large parts of the population in the North as well as in the South. The Southern domination of the state and of the administrative apparatus led to the creation of what

¹ Although this is contradicted by empirical evidence, a mainstream discourse on conflict in Africa tends to give credence to the idea that ethnic diversity is a cause of instability. As the cases of Somalia and Rwanda show, diversity is no more conducive to conflict than homogeneity. As far as Chad is concerned, we argue that ethnicity cannot be considered a valuable independent variable. The fragmented structure of ethnic groups in clans and sub-clans complicates the game of politico-ethnic alliances. Factionalism is a more adequate analytical tool for understanding the shifting nature of Chadian coalitions.

might be considered retrospectively the embryo of a sustainable militarisation of political life. In 1966 several Chadian rebel movements attempted to rally and form a united platform in the town of Nyala in Southern Darfur. In many respects, the *Front de Liberation Nationale du Tchad* (Frolinat) was similar to current armed groups in Chad: it was mostly comprised of so-called Northerners, who rallied in Darfur with Sudanese support and was an attempt to unify otherwise highly diverging groups and leaders whose only common ground was their aversion to President Tombalbaye and what they considered the injustice of Southern domination. The Frolinat's inability to form a homogenous and coherent group was an aggravating factor of the political crisis in the 60s and the 70s at the same level as the crisis of governance. Personal rivalries and ideological and ethnic differences impeded its transformation into a national party, free from regional (Northern) considerations.

The replacement of Tombalbaye by Colonel Felix Malloum (also a Southerner) as a result of a bloody putsch in 1975 failed to end the political instability that significantly contributed to erode the state's monopoly of legitimate violence. Insurgency in the North and the East had already reached the stage of full-scale war. After negotiations led by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) under the auspices of Nigeria, one of the rebel leaders, Goukouni Oueddeye, rose to power in 1979 at the head of a national unity government that did not survive the tensions between him and another rebel leader, Hissène Habré. However, Goukouni's rise to power marked the end of Southern political and economic domination in post-independence Chad. With Hissène Habré's seizure of power in 1982 and finally Deby's successful coup in 1990, an era of Northern omnipotence began that still prevails today.

Democratisation Challenges

At the heart of Chad's longstanding crisis lie a series of unaddressed democratisation challenges that have been recently exacerbated by chronic regional instability. The short overview of the country's political history has amply demonstrated some fundamental aspects of Chadian political life. Decades of political unrest, regularly alternating with full-scale civil war have left significant traces on the country's political and state institutions.

One of the most important features of Chadian political and social life is the permanence of violence as a means of expressing different interests. It is a political culture in a country that has never experienced a constitutional regime change since its independence. Apart from the first president of the country, all Heads of State have seized power by violent means. In this context, rebels and other warlords are actually political entrepreneurs who make use of the only available tool (armed rebellion) to gain power either by conquering the central authority in the capital or through tactical 'power-sharing' with the regime. This has led to a high interchangeability of political actors according to which today's warlords can be considered the ruling elite of tomorrow and vice-versa. To seize and maintain power, political entrepreneurs are therefore dependant on their capacities to build alliances that are by definition fragile and ever shifting. The predominance of violence in the political culture is also deeply rooted in the country's social fabric, where the possession of a weapon (be it as soldier, policeman, customs agent or even bandit) generally provides a high social status. This is fuelled by a widespread culture of factionalism that, far more than ethnicity, explains the shifting power configurations in Chad.²

² See Rene Lemarchand (1986), 'Chad: The Misadventures of the North-South Dialectic', in *African Studies Review*, vol. 29, nr 3, p. 27-41.

The so-called democratisation process of the 1990s barely changed the modalities of Chadian political life. On the contrary, it provided the ruling elite with the necessary legal means to legitimise the violent exercise of political power. When Idriss Deby seized power in 1990 by ending the dictatorship of Hissein Habre, he raised the hope that Chad would break with its long tradition of politico-military rule. His first steps towards opening up the political system were rather promising in a country deeply traumatised by the tyranny of his predecessor, with which Deby was also prominently associated as a former Chief of Staff. He reintroduced a multi-party system, authorised the emergence of pluralist media and allowed for the adoption of a new democratic constitution in 1996. However, the first presidential (1996) and legislative elections (1997) rapidly indicated that the ruling party and its leader were still caught in the logic of the one-party system. This impression was confirmed in the second set of elections (2001 and 2002) that proved even more chaotic in terms of organisation and popular participation and which led to its boycotting by the main political parties. In reaction to the mostly negative statements about his re-election, Deby made the promise to abide by the constitution and to step down in 2006.

The direct trigger of the current political crisis in Chad is to be found in Deby's decision in 2004 to amend the constitution and run for a third term. This has not only alienated important parts of his inner circle and ethnic group, who reproached him for monopolising the country's resources for his own clan's benefit but also radicalised the already existing tendency towards the militarisation of political entrepreneurs. In the absence of democratic institutions to manage elite competition, armed rebellion remains the only way to express political grievances. As soon as he announced his will to run for a third term, Deby antagonised large factions of his close entourage, with some of them joining the rebellion. In fact, two of the main rebel movements in Chad are currently led by former close collaborators of President Deby, who changed sides and thereby confirmed the thin line between government and rebellion.³ The defection of these two leaders was just the most visible point of a much greater number of defections that significantly affected Deby's legitimacy. Although rebel movements are known for their incapacity to form sustainable political platforms, they generally manage to build *ad-hoc* coalitions aimed at seizing power. In that respect, the February 2008 coup attempt was almost identical with another similar coup in 2006 that also failed because of decisive French involvement on Deby's side, the only difference being that the April 2006 coup attempt was organised by another coalition of rebel movements led by Mahamat Nour –not to be confused with Mahamat Nouri– who subsequently became Defence Minister in the Government after Libyan-led negotiations.

Although Deby's constitutional changes are by no means exceptional in Africa, their impact on a weakly institutionalised political system such as Chad's is much more destructive. The concomitance of the constitutional amendment and the beginning of the exploitation of oilfields has added to the fragility of Chad's situation. Unlike his predecessors, who did not enjoy this essential privilege, Deby is heading a country with

³ The first and most important leader is Mahamat Nouri, a former Ambassador to Sudan and from the Goran ethnic group like the former President Hissene Habre. He is leading an alliance of rebel movements called UFDD (*Union des Forces pour la Democratie et le Developpement*). As former General in the national army, Nouri is the operational commander of the united rebel movements and is close to Sudan. The other major leader is Timan Erdmi, sometimes presented as the President's nephew because of his Zaghawa origin. Timan and his twin brother Tom were at a certain time considered as grey eminence of Deby's regime used to hold important positions in the state apparatus. Timan is now leading a rebel movement comprised of Zaghawa dissidents, the RaFD (*Rassemblement des Forces pour le Developpement*).

newly discovered oil wealth. This significantly increases his possibilities for patronage and his ability to co-opt opposition leaders by offering them government positions in exchange for their collaboration. It is likely that the prospects of ruling over newly acquired oil wealth played a significant role in Deby's change of mind regarding the constitution. His own clan within the Zaghawa ethnic group (the Bideyat) have particularly profited from the President's largesse. As a minority group (around 3% of the population) they have gained a political and economic importance that is reflected in their over-representation in government, administrative and army positions. The increased oil revenues particularly enhanced Deby's ability to further militarise his regime by (mis)using the terrorist metaphor and attracting international support. By describing his political opponents as terrorists, Deby is not only postponing necessary democratic reforms but he is also trying to secure military support from countries like France and the US.

To summarise, it can be argued that the concentration of power in Deby's hands, increased corruption, the militarisation of his regime and the systematic repression of opposition leaders do constitute a serious threat to sustainable peace in Chad. But most worrying of all is the President's adamant refusal to find a negotiated political solution to the country's problems through negotiations with both civilian parties and rebel movements. Deby's strategy has always consisted in signing separate agreements with civilian opposition groups and armed movements. By doing so he seeks to avoid the creation of a platform of all opposition groups against him. Part of this attitude is due to the strong support the President receives from important international actors. The outcome is that he is sowing the seeds of the further institutionalisation of coups as a political instrument in his country.

International Intervention: Part of the Problem or the Solution?

The conflict dynamic in Chad cannot be fully understood without taking into account the role and interests of the international actors involved. In fact, some of these actors have significantly contributed to shape Chad's political history by providing support to one group or faction against the others. By doing this the international actors constitute an important part of the process of faction building and power broking in a country where they sometimes appear to be the sole legitimate source of power. France, Sudan, Libya and to a certain extent the US, are to be considered in this category, although with significantly different degrees of involvement.⁴ They also contribute to shape the general understanding of conflict dynamics in the country and the region by influencing its perception and the priorities for eventual solutions. A good example of the tendentious and unilateral perception of conflict dynamics in Chad and its direct neighbourhood is provided by the Darfur conflict. Most international media and Western diplomats generally suggest that the conflict in Darfur is the main destabilising factor in Chad and the Central African Republic. Some even see a causality between the Darfur conflict and Chad's increasing instability. This idea largely underlies the international efforts aimed at halting the spiralling violence in the region, in accordance with what is generally referred to as the spill-over theory. According to this theory, the Central African Republic and Chad would be peaceful countries if it were not for the conflict in Darfur. What the adepts of this theory overlook is the long history of instability in both countries that the Darfur crisis has aggravated but certainly not created. Furthermore, the Darfur situation provides an opportunity for weakly legitimised governments in the Central African Republic and Chad

⁴ For a thorough understanding of external actors' involvement in Chad, see P.S. Handy (2007), 'Chad: Wading Through a Domestic Political Crisis in a Turbulent Region', *ISS Situation Report*. See also ICG (2006), 'Tchad; vers le retour de la guerre?', *Rapport Afrique*, nr 111.

to strengthen their grip on power and capitalise on the unusual international attention given to their countries, which are wrongly perceived to be victims.

If the existence of a conflict system (ie, the merger of a series of local conflict formations) is uncontested, the persistence of simplistic dichotomies (Arabs versus Black Africans and Moslems against Christians) tends to legitimise certain forms of symbolic action rather than comprehensive solutions. In fact, Chad and the Central African Republic only matter to the international community as long as they are referred to in connection with Darfur. Given the prominence of Darfur in US and European diplomacy, many Western governments have come under enormous domestic pressure to act. UN resolution 1778, that allows Eufor's deployment in Chad and the Central African Republic, amply illustrates this narrow focus on Darfur to the detriment of surrounding sources of instability. Although the international community seems to have a better sense of the regional character of the crises in the triangle, it still seems to favour national solutions without political strategies.

Contrary to what is generally suggested, European peacekeeping operations in Eastern Chad and the North-Eastern Central African Republic (Eufor and Minurcat) are not primarily aimed at bringing peace and stability in those countries but are rather directed towards stabilising some of the consequences of the Darfur conflict. This action without a strategy is characterised by the lack of a political solution, the absence of a viable peace agreement between all Chadian political actors (there is no peace to keep) and the evident reluctance of President Deby to open up the political sphere. Finally, the peacekeeping mission will –beyond its humanitarian objectives– also contribute to stabilise an authoritarian and increasingly militarised regime that exploits an alleged danger of islamisation as incarnated by Khartoum. By doing so, the unanswered question of the collision of French national interests in Chad with a more open European agenda will add to the confusion of a mission that is largely perceived by Chadians as additional support for a weakly legitimised President Deby.

Conclusions: Political instability in the Central African country has deep roots in the past due to its French colonisation, the long tradition of violence between different ethnic groups, the lack of natural resources and the weaknesses of institutions. Political leaders have resorted to repression and authoritarian rule to consolidate successive governments but personal rivalries and ideological and ethnic differences have prevented the country's governance. Power has shifted from Southern political and economic domination in post-independence Chad to Northern supremacy after Deby's successful coup in 1990. Violence is deeply rooted in the country's political culture and in the widespread factionalism that, far more than ethnicity, explains the shifting power configurations in Chad. Power is seized by violent means and the balance of power is contingent on the armed pressure of rebels and other warlords because armed rebellion remains the only way to express political grievances in the absence of democratic institutions.

The current political crisis in Chad was triggered by President Deby's decision in 2004 to amend the constitution and run for a third term. This will allow him to postpone democratic reforms without negotiating a political solution to the country's problems with civilian parties. As regards the rebel movements, Deby believes he will be able to fight them thanks to the procurement of military equipment with oil revenues of oil and by accusing them of being terrorist organisations in order to gain foreign military support. The key threats to a sustainable peace in Chad are the concentration of power in Deby's hands, the increased corruption and militarisation of his regime and the systematic repression of opposition leaders. However, Western governments still believe that the main risk for

Chadian stability is the interaction with the Darfur conflict. As UN Security Council resolution 1.778 shows, the deployment of the Eufor in Eastern Chad and the North-East of the Central African Republic (Eufor and Minurcat) is not primarily aimed at bringing peace and stability to these countries but to mitigate the consequences of the Darfur conflict. With this concept of crisis management in mind, the EU peacekeeping mission will reinforce and legitimise Deby's regime against potential challengers and the search for enduring stability in the area could delay the adoption of the structural reforms that Chad needs to overcome its failed democratisation.

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